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I Don't Know Why You Say Goodbye, I Say Hello: Concepts of Place in Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*

Emily Frances Cooley
University of Southern Mississippi

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by

Emily Frances Cooley

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ABSTRACT

I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU SAY GOODBYE, I SAY HELLO: CONCEPTS OF PLACE IN EUDORA WELTY'S *THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER* AND ELIZABETH BOWEN'S *THE DEATH OF THE HEART*

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The Optimist's Daughter and *The Death of the* Heart reveal that, for Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Bowen, place is more than mere landscape. Place is both the scene upon which their novels unfold and the means by which they convey their abstract understandings of the world. Place provides the physical settings of their stories, but it also reveals something about their psyche or symbolic language. The settings used by Welty in *The Optimist's Daughter* reinforce traditional notions of place in Southern life and society whereas the settings employed by Bowen in *The Death of the Heart* exhibit a partiality for mobility over rootedness. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty's protagonist must confront a possible loss of heart and home, and in *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen's protagonist is faced with an actual loss of freedom and mobility. Thus, through a study of these two novels, Welty's focus on place as it relates to roots and tradition, and Bowen's fascination with place as it relates to continual movement and progress, become apparent.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1950, Elizabeth Bowen was scheduled to pay her first visit to the United States in seventeen years, and Eudora Welty hoped to see her while she was in New York (Waldron 215). The two writers had met one year earlier when Welty, while traveling in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship, found herself in Dublin, Ireland (Prenshaw "The Antiphonies" 639). Despite having never looked up anyone she did not know, Welty instigated their first meeting (Prenshaw *More Conversations* 101). She later said the prospect of meeting Bowen tempted her "like a fantasy almost," until she gave in and sent a note telling Bowen she would like to pay her a call (101). As it turned out, Bowen was in County Cork at the time visiting her family's ancestral home, Bowen's Court, and, upon receiving Welty's note, telephoned her at her hotel and invited her to come down from Dublin for the weekend (101).

Bowen wrote at the time of Welty's first visit: "I take to her most immensely ... She's very un-writerish and *bien elevee*. A Southern girl from the State of Mississippi; quiet, self-contained, easy, outwardly old-fashioned, very funny indeed when she starts talking" (as quoted in Glendinning 262). While getting to know one another, the two writers filled their days with conversations and long walks: "In the evenings, when neighbors sometimes dropped in, they all drank whisky and played card games, Scrabble, and parlor games" (Waldron 210). As casual as it sounds, there were exciting moments as well, moments when they

jumped in the car and rode "madly around the neighborhood, with Bowen driving very fast and usually on the wrong side of the road" (210).

Welty has said of her trip to Bowen's Court, "It was my first sight of the South of Ireland, the real South" (Waldron 208). Welty was struck by the "almost tropical" setting with its "palm trees and fuchsia hedges and pink and blue plastered houses that made you think of Savannah or New Orleans" (208). After having seen and experienced this place with Bowen, Welty determined that "Elizabeth is a *Southerner*" both in terms of her congeniality and in all of the other ways that Southerners differ from Northerners no matter where they are found (208). No wonder then, that Welty was thrilled to learn in the spring of 1950, that Bowen intended to save her a trip to New York and pay her a visit in Mississippi instead (215). Finally, it would be Welty's turn to give Bowen a taste of her South; the one Welty knew and loved so well.

Welty ensured that Bowen's first visit to Mississippi was a fun and authentic one. While traveling around with Welty, Bowen "gamely ate fried catfish and enchiladas and drank chicory coffee" (Waldron 215). Welty introduced Bowen to her friends and took her to her favorite out-of-the-way restaurants (215). Bowen said of the Mississippians she met on that trip, that she enjoyed them and found them to be "like the Irish, 'warm and gay and friendly'" (215). This second meeting cemented the writers' friendship. Welty and Bowen would continue to visit each other in both Ireland and Mississippi many times as part of a friendship that would last until Bowen's death in 1973 (Prenshaw "The Antiphonies" 639).

In the spring of 1951, Welty traveled to London, England and stayed for a time at Bowen's house near Regent's Park. "She tried to work, but spent most of the time staring out the drawing room window at Regent's Park and the swans on the lake" (Waldron 218). Welty's fascination with the swans probably eluded Bowen who said during that visit: "Eudora Welty is staying in the house—working away at one of her great short stories in another room. This is ideal: I'm so fond of her, and her preoccupation during the day with her own work gives me a freedom unknown when one has an ordinary 'social' guest" (Glendinning 263). As one commentator has noted, "Welty's reserve made her the consummate houseguest for Bowen, and the time and oceans and a shared vision of art made the relationship an enduring one" (Trouard 263).

After some time at Regent's Park, Welty and Bowen traded London for Ireland and spent the month of April 1951 in Bowen's Court. While there, Bowen started a novel and Welty began "The Bride of the Innisfallen," a story later included in a collection by the same name with a dedication to Bowen (Waldron 218). Welty returned home at the end of spring and the two writers were separated until October of 1951 when Bowen arrived in the U.S. for an extended lecture tour and with plans to visit Welty in late November (Marrs *Eudora Welty* 212). It was around that time that they ran into another Southern writer, Elizabeth Spencer, who referred to them affectionately as, "a Jackson doll and an Irish babe" (213).

By all accounts, Welty positively adored Bowen. Even when rumors of lesbianism and other scandalous behavior circulated among Welty's writing

peers, she maintained her friendship with Bowen (Waldron 225). Welty noted of her relationship with Bowen, "Elizabeth was a marvelous writer about writing and very helpful to me" (Prenshaw "The Antiphonies" 641). Welty also said of Bowen: "She was a marvelous lady, a responsive person, you know, to mood and place, and she was so happy, so delighted by things in life" (Prenshaw *More Conversations* 101). "I learned from her. I think she had the best analytical mind of a writer, about writing, that I've ever come across. She had a marvelous mind, you know, all aside from imagination and the sensibilities you need to write fiction" (103). Bowen returned Welty's praise, saying her stories were deeper and more profound than those of "inventive" writers who understood plot, character and scene but could not summon great ideas or emotions (Evans 52). Bowen described Welty as "a creative writer, whose art invites contemplation and discovery" (52). She even called Welty a "genius" (Glendinning 262).

Welty and Bowen were plainly influenced by one another's writing and by the friendship they shared, yet their individual approaches to fiction were always uniquely their own. Welty's prose tends to be direct with a skillful yet sparing use of language. Bowen's prose tends to be compact, dense and intentionally complicated. Welty had a fine ear for conversation. She wrote masterful stories in the Southern vernacular, in a voice that spoke clearly and democratically to a large audience. By contrast, Bowen wrote in a highly refined manner. She frequently used French words and phrases without translation. As a result, it is hard to imagine that Bowen's stories were readily accessible to any but an educated, intellectual audience. Thus, despite their personal and professional

admiration for one another, the reader should not fail to distinguish them. Welty and Bowen neither relied too heavily on nor borrowed too liberally from each other. Their purposes in writing and the styles they employed are their own.

To gain a more complete understanding of Welty and Bowen, it is helpful to examine both their similarities and their differences. To this end, this thesis will focus on the literary concept of place and examine the different ways in which Welty and Bowen each use it as a vehicle to express their ideas and provide structure to their stories. In particular, this thesis will examine how Welty's novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*, embraces an especially Southern sense of place that implies stasis and adherence to tradition while Bowen's novel, *The Death of the Heart*, speaks to a more European sense of place that embraces mobility while disregarding borders and geographical boundaries. By examining the role and function of place in these two works, this thesis will seek to highlight one of the principal ways in which Welty and Bowen differ, cross and converge. The reader will find that place is vitally important to both writers yet they approach it from very different perspectives and use it to very different ends. Through this examination, the reader will come to a better understanding of the dynamic relationship between these two writers.

Place is a concept that has been variously defined by writers and commentators alike. According to Tim Cresswell, author of *Place: A Short Introduction*, the "most straightforward and common definition" of place is "a meaningful location" (Cresswell 7). Beyond this basic definition, Cresswell identifies place as "location," "locale," and "sense of place" (7). He then surmises

that "space" is akin to movement and that "places" are the pauses in between the spaces, or the "stops along the way" (8). "[P]lace is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world," Cresswell concludes (11). Another commentator, Ruth Vande Kieft has echoed Creswell's conclusion in her book, *Eudora Welty*:

> Place is not only the region or setting of a story; it stands for everything in a story that fixes it to the known, recognizable, present and "real" world of everyday human experience. It is like the solid flesh that both encloses (pins down) and discloses (reveals) the more elusive human thoughts and feelings. (Vande Kieft 51)

Definitions of place like those espoused by Cresswell and Vande Kieft, which incorporate both corporeal and symbolic elements, are not unusual. Place is often expressed in terms that recognize both its solidly functional purposes (i.e., as the region or setting of a story) and its ability to reveal something about the psyche or symbolic language of the writer (i.e., it is the bridge that connects the world of human experience with that of human thought). Thus, the concept of place in literature should be understood as both the concrete locale and location wherein the story takes place and as the abstract sense of place to which the writer refers.

In *The Eye of the Story*, Welty explains, for the writer, "place is where he has his roots, place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference; in his work, the point of view" (117). Thus,

Welty clearly believes an understanding of place is meaningful for readers seeking to explore the relationship between her life and her fiction. Furthermore, her allusions to a writer's "roots," "base of reference" and "point of view" suggest an association with traditional places and place relationships. In other words, these allusions reinforce the traditional notion that the place where a person is from, their home, dictates the person they become.

Although Bowen described herself as "a writer for whom places loom large" (*Pictures and Conversations* 34), her writing suggests that reliance on traditional notions of place may be unnecessary. For example, in *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen eschews "traditional places – garden, forest, country house, city" (Lutwack 213) for apartments, furnished rooms, hotels and vacation houses. Instead of rootedness, these settings reflect the modern trend toward increased mobility between places. In this way, Bowen's fiction may properly be viewed as an "experiment with mobility" that reflects "progress beyond the traditional binding of women to the homeplace" in favor of greater freedom (112). Rather than a concern for "the loss of cherished places, and the despair of placelessness" (182), as found in Welty's writing, Bowen's work suggests a focus on movement and progress.

Like her fiction, Bowen's interviews and autobiographical writings reflect a fascination with conditions that promote improved mobility such as "the development of transportation and communication" (Lutwack 183). Moreover, Bowen has identified motion as a key element in her fiction. She has described the absence of motion in the scene of a novel as "dead weight" (*Pictures and*

Conversations 38) and admitted her characters "are almost perpetually in transit" (41). Like Bowen herself, the characters that populate her fiction "zestfully" hop aboard ships, planes, railcars and automobiles (42) and are drawn to the "birdlike freedom" of travel on the open road (43).

Just as one can compare Bowen's own passion for motion with the perpetual movement of her characters, comparisons may be drawn between the actual people, places and events experienced by Welty and Bowen and those that appear in their stories. Even so, there remain clear distinctions between what is real and what is imagined. Welty has written:

> The characters who make up my stories and novels are not portraits. Characters I invent along with the story that carries them. Attached to them are what I've borrowed, perhaps unconsciously, bit by bit, of persons I have seen or noticed or remembered in the flesh – a cast of countenance here, a manner of walking there, that jump to the visualizing mind when a story is underway. (*One Writer's Beginnings* 100)

Stated another way, real life may serve as an inspiration for fiction, but readers should not assume that fiction is the mirror image of reality. If fiction reflects a writer's experiences at all, it does so like a funhouse mirror by distorting certain facets of the real world while truthfully representing others.

If there is any aspect of fiction that benefits from a firm tether to reality, it is place. As Welty recalled Bowen saying, "'Physical detail cannot be invented.' It can only be chosen" (*One Writer's Beginnings* 99). For this reason, the best

creative writing is set in places that bear a material resemblance to those the author has experienced firsthand. On this topic, Welty has rhetorically asked: "Should the writer, then, write about home?" (*The Eye of the Story* 129). While there is no reason for a writer to refrain from exploring the far corners of her imagination, it should be no surprise if her clearest descriptions of place share important physical details with locations she knows best. As Welty has written, "It is both natural and sensible that the place where we have our roots should become the setting, the first and primary proving ground, of our fiction" (129). Thus, when presented with the "conflicting urges to stay put and to wander," Welty determined to root herself "solidly in the community" instead of "lighting out from it" and thereby aligned herself both with those writers for whom place is essential and with a distinctly Southern way of life (Brinkmeyer *Remapping* 20).

It has been written that the sense of place in Welty's fiction "includes the town and its families, further back in generations and family history than one can imagine" (Evans 131). Welty has likewise said that her "intimate sense of place" comes from the Southern condition of being surrounded by "people about whom we know almost everything" and from the "sense of continuity" this condition provides (Prenshaw *Conversations* 199). She has also noted that, "Now that people are on the move a lot more, some of that sense of continuity is gone," but "it will always be in our roots, as Southerners. ... Even if you move around, you know where you have your base. And I think that is terribly important" (200).

Bowen, in her unfinished autobiography *Pictures and Conversations*, argues that her own "terrain cannot be demarcated on any existing map; it is

unspecific. Ireland and England, between them, contain my stories, with occasional outgoings into France or Italy: within the boundaries of those countries there is no particular locality I have staked a claim on or identified with" (35). Although Bowen believes "what gives fiction verisimilitude is its topography," (34) she refuses to be shoehorned into any one particular locality. While Welty writes from the place where she stands, Bowen believes "imagination of my kind is most caught, most fired, most worked upon by the unfamiliar" (36-37). Thus, Bowen's fiction can be read as an argument against the traditional places and place relationships embraced by Welty in favor of a more mobile existence wherein unfamiliar places can be more readily encountered and absorbed.

An approach to writing focused on movement over rootedness may have been more necessity than choice for Bowen who noted of her own writing that, "on the whole, places more often than persons have sparked off stories" (Vande Kieft 181). Bowen also noted that the inspiration she found in places was especially strong when "an intensified, all but spell-binding beholding" of a place produced "an atmosphere or mood in which characters and events naturally find their place" (181). Thus, for Bowen, it was frequent travel to different and varied locales in search of those places into which characters would naturally fit that provided the base of reference and point of view for her fiction. Although travel may have been a necessary part of Bowen's process, it should not be viewed as superior to Welty's reliance on rootedness because, as at least one commentator

has noted, "To be in constant motion is to experience only surfaces; to remain in place is to plumb depths" (Brinkmeyer *Remapping* 15).

Although Welty is widely and correctly associated with rootedness and Bowen with mobility, it would be incorrect to imagine that Welty was somehow opposed to the idea of traveling to new places and gaining new experiences. Quite to the contrary, it has been noted that while "traveling around Mississippi on various 'assignments' [Welty] gathered material for some of her earliest stories" (Vande Kieft 19). Likewise, it has been noted that Welty's life followed a "pattern of listening and learning at home, then seeking and finding a voice through which to leave and return home" (MacKethan 44). In a similar vein, Welty has written:

> Naturally, it is the very breath of life, whether one writes a word of fiction or not, to go out and see what is to be seen of the world. For the artist to be unwilling to move, mentally or spiritually or physically, out of the familiar is a sign that spiritual timidity or poverty or decay has come upon him; for what is familiar will then have turned into all that is tyrannical. (*The Eye of the Story* 129)

Thus, travel for Welty accomplished two ends. It provided inspiration for her work and allowed her to obtain a better, or at least different, understanding of her home. As Lucinda H. MacKethan has noted, "Welty journeyed away from home and then returned, not in order to reconstruct the world [she] had left but to see it and create it anew from changed angles of vision" (MacKethan 39).

MacKethan's observation that Welty's travels afforded her with new perspectives on her place of beginning is only slightly removed from Bowen's statement that her own imagination was best fueled by the unfamiliar (*Pictures and Conversations* 36-37). Arguably, then, the difference in Bowen and Welty's approach to place does not lie in their willingness to embark on a journey. Rather, the difference is that Welty always returned home to write of that place she knew best while Bowen embraced the freedom to write from and about wherever she happened to be at the time.

"Attachment to place [is] one of the ingredients of tradition," therefore, "rootedness," as exemplified in the life and writing of Welty, is "necessary to keep alive the traditions that support society" (Lutwack 213-14). By contrast, mobility, such as that embraced by the life and work of Bowen, results in "the shorter duration of place relationships" and, as such, has led to "a historic decline in the significance of place to human life" (Toffler 93). Thus, Bowen's abandonment of traditional notions of place and rootedness may be characterized as somewhat avant-garde. Welty's attachment to place, on the other hand, harkens back to older ideals involving the preservation of tradition and society and renders her the literary equivalent of a stalwart for place. This distinction is arguably due, not to a difference in the degree of genius found in these two writers, but to a fundamental disparity in the way Southerners and Europeans see the world.

> A Southern sense of place, of course, implies not mobility but stasis; one can only celebrate place if one is "in place" – that is, settled and rooted. ... The Southern opposition between place and

> movement might … be understood as the opposition between place and time, between the circle of society and the straight line of time – a line always pushing into the future and ushering in change. (Brinkmeyer *Remapping* 14, 15)

Taking this commentary and applying it to Welty leads to the conclusion that, as a Southerner, she stands "settled and rooted" in her "circle of society" and invokes through her writing a sense of place that implies stasis. By contrast, Bowen, as a European, feels free to embrace mobility. Bowen has loudly professed that her own "terrain" is not Irish, English, French, or Italian or, for that matter, specifically tied to any place that can "be demarcated on any existing map" (*Pictures and Conversations* 35). Rather, Bowen's sense of place speaks to a European sensibility which is unrestrained by the geographical "boundaries of those countries" (35).

Throughout her life, Welty sought out and embraced opportunities to travel and experience the world outside her Jackson home. Yet it was to home that she always returned and, as a consequence, her writings are grounded in the places where they occur and rooted to the landscapes and settings best known to her. Travel was a means for Welty, not an end. Travel enabled her to better understand the place where she was from and, occasionally, to glimpse that place through the eyes of people who did not share her intimate and firsthand knowledge of it.

In "Learning to See," the second chapter of her autobiography *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty reminisces about childhood trips from Jackson to Ohio

and West Virginia to visit her extended family. During these long trips "through the country," her mother would act as navigator while her father drove (*One Writer's Beginnings* 43). Along the way, the family would play games and sing harmonica tunes, and Welty would find herself hypnotized by the slowing crawling landscape (44). Of those trips Welty wrote, they "made you conscious of borders; you rode ready for them. Crossing a river, crossing a county line, crossing a state line – especially crossing the line you couldn't see but knew was there, between the South and the North – you could draw a breath and feel the difference" (44). While drawing her awareness to borders and crossings, the long, slow road trips of her youth also gave Welty an opportunity to glimpse the many small towns they passed along the way (46).

Upon recalling the small towns she saw as a child from the window of her parents' slowly moving automobile, and the lasting impression those towns made on her way of seeing the world, Welty wrote:

> Towns, like people, had clear identities and your imagination could go out to meet them. You saw houses, yards, fields, and people busy in them, the people that had a life where they were. You could hear their bank clocks striking, you could smell their bakeries. You would know those towns again, recognize the salient detail, seen so close up. Nothing was blurred, and in passing along Main Street, slowed down from twenty-five to twenty miles an hour, you didn't miss anything on either side. Going somewhere "through the

> country" acquainted you with the whole way there and back. (*One Writer's Beginnings* 46)

Thus, the slow, cross-country trips of Welty's youth gave her both an opportunity to see and to learn to see in a way that would critically impact her later writing. In this way, travel became, for Welty, a means of providing context to place.

Notably, Welty's later travels by rail could not match her childhood experiences traversing the countryside in her parents' automobile. When traveling by rail, she found that she could not become intimately acquainted with the whole way there and back because the sights, sounds and smells of the small towns she passed along the way were obscured by the speed, noise and smoke of the train. Instead, "the next town sprang into view, and just as quickly was gone" (*One Writer's Beginnings* 73). Although Welty recognized that there was greater precision and comfort in rail travel, the details she had so enjoyed during her long childhood car trips were reduced to blurs as the train flew down the tracks (74).

The distinction Welty draws between travel by rail and travel by automobile is particularly notable in light of Bowen's fascination with mobility. Where Bowen embraced motion, fluidity and speed, it appears that Welty was far less enamored with modern developments in transportation. Rather than improvements, Welty likely saw such developments as a factor contributing to the diminished "importance of place and increased importance of movement in twentieth-century life" (Lutwack 183). Whereas Welty embraced travel as a means of obtaining a fuller and more intimate relationship with traditional places,

Bowen saw travel as an end unto itself. Welty's and Bowen's very different approaches to movement and place can be seen clearly in two of their seminal works – *The Optimist's Daughter* and *The Death of the Heart*.

In *The Optimist's Daughter,* Welty tells the story of Laurel McKelva Hand, a young widow living in Chicago, who is called home to the South by news that her father, Judge McKelva, has fallen ill. As the novel opens, Laurel, her father and his new wife, Fay, are discussing their options with a specialist in New Orleans. Fay is nearly the same age as Laurel and is nothing like Laurel's mother, Becky, who has been dead for many years. Although a treatment is undertaken, things take a turn for the worse and the judge soon dies, leaving Laurel and Fay to see to the handling of his final affairs. Upon their return to the McKelva family home in Mount Salus, Mississippi, the two women are met by a cast of townspeople whom Laurel knows from her youth, and by Fay's family who have traveled from their home in Texas to join her. A visitation at the McKelva house and a funeral in the Mount Salus cemetery follow. Afterward, Fay returns to Texas for a time, leaving Laurel to sort through her memories and family belongings alone. When Fay returns, she and Laurel have a confrontation in the McKelva kitchen after which it is clear that Laurel will be leaving Mount Salus forever. As the novel closes, Laurel is on her way back to Chicago and Fay is left in Mount Salus with the McKelva home and all its contents in her possession.

The Death of the Heart is the story of a young girl, Portia Quayne, and her struggle to survive in a stagnant new environment following the death of her parents. Shortly before the novel opens, Portia's mother dies and it is discovered

that her father's last wishes were for her to spend one year in the home of her half-brother, Thomas Quayne, and his wife, Anna. This presents quite a challenge for Portia who, until this time, has only known a life of free movement and experience. Feeling both abandoned and constrained by the limitations of her new life, Portia begins to pine for the affections an older boy, Eddie. Portia records her feelings for Eddie in her diary and, when the novel opens, Anna has just invaded Portia's privacy by reading these thoughts. Over the course of the novel, Portia, Thomas and Anna attempt to make their way through the better part of a difficult year. Portia sees Thomas and Anna's loveless relationship for what it is, recognizes that Eddie is inconsistent and unreliable, and struggles to fit in at a proper school for girls. In the end, Portia flees Thomas and Anna's home, is finally and completely disappointed by Eddie and tries to cling to the only other traveler in the story, an older gentleman, Major Brutt. Even Major Brutt, however, proves to be a disappointment to Portia when he reveals her location to Anna. As the novel closes, Thomas and Anna's maid, Matchett, is on her way to retrieve Portia and return her to the home she wants so desperately to escape.

The Optimist's Daughter is primarily concerned with the decisions that arise when family responsibilities and community relationships are jeopardized. *The Death of the Heart* addresses the difficulties that surface when constraints, no matter how well meaning, are imposed on someone who has tasted the freedom of movement. Tension in *The Optimist's Daughter* is created when the permanence of tradition is pitted against the potential of an unknown future. Likewise, tension in *The Death of the Heart* is created when present limitations

on mobility threaten to stifle new opportunities for exploration. Thus, the central dilemma in both novels is whether to embrace what is known or what is unknown. In the case of Laurel, family and community are the known elements. In Portia's case, travel and experience amount to what is most familiar.

In addition to a common central dilemma, *The Optimist's Daughter* and *The Death of the Heart* share a number of similarities. Both novels have orphans as their protagonists and both of these orphans, Laurel and Portia, have stepmothers who are entirely different from their own, true mothers. Laurel's stepmother, Fay, is a childish creature with no apparent sense of responsibility and no appreciation for tradition. Laurel's true mother, Becky, never forgot who she was or where she came from. Fay, by contrast, denies her roots and rejects her family. Portia's "stepmother," Anna, is not a true stepmother but does serve as an approximation of one. Unlike Portia's true mother, Irene, Anna is a sneak who invades Portia's privacy and gossips about it with her friend. Whereas Irene was a bohemian and a gypsy traveler, Anna is a sophisticate concerned with social standing and appearances.

Given the similarities between *The Optimist's Daughter* and *The Death of the Heart*, these novels provide a perfect opportunity to study Welty and Bowen's individual approaches to the literary concept of place. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty's protagonist must confront a possible loss of heart and home, and in *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen's protagonist is faced with an actual loss of freedom and mobility. Thus, through a study of these two novels, Welty's

focus on place as it relates to roots and tradition, and Bowen's fascination with place as it relates to continual movement and progress, become apparent.

CHAPTER II

THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER:

AN APOLOGY FOR STAYING PUT

One Writer's Beginnings, Eudora Welty's autobiography, opens dryly but informatively with the following line: "In our house on North Congress Street in Jackson, Mississippi, where I was born, the oldest of three children, in 1909, we grew up to the striking of clocks" (*One Writer's Beginnings* 1). What this opening may lack in pizzazz, it makes up for in setting. It is as though Welty has drawn back a heavy curtain to reveal the well-appointed interior of a Southern home as the center pendulum of a grandfather clock swings to strike a round brass chime. Children can be heard playing just offstage. Outside the set walls, cicadas are chirping. When this opening line is considered in light of Cresswell's definition of "place," i.e., "a meaningful location": either a "locale," "location" or "sense of place" (Cresswell 7), the importance of this concept in Welty's life and work begins to emerge. Right from the start of *One Writer's Beginnings*, we know the place. The locale is Jackson, the location is a house on North Congress Street, and the sense of place is one of home. Although a good deal less direct, the initial pronouncement of place comes just as early in *The Optimist's Daughter*, where the first line reads: "A nurse held the door open for them" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 1). The locale of a hospital, the location of a hallway outside an examination room and an innate sense of trepidation about the place immediately come to mind. Welty's audience does not yet know who, what, when or why, but they know *where*.

The strong association with place that exists for Welty's major and minor characters alike is due to the fact that "place is essential to identity" in almost all of Welty's works (Marrs "Place and Displaced" 647). Welty's characters "find their identities in the home place" and "suspect people from 'off'" (647). Thus, the concept of place was meaningful not just to Welty's personal development as a writer, but to the development of the stories and characters she created. In *The Eye of the Story*, Welty argues that an astute sense of place is fundamental to good writing and, in fact, may be the very wellspring of creative thought:

> I think the sense of place is as essential to good and honest writing as a logical mind; surely they are somewhere related. It is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are. Place absorbs our earliest notice and attention, it bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it. It perseveres in bringing us back to earth when we fly too high. (*The Eye of the Story* 128)

Where Welty stands is never long in question. The South, Mississippi, Jackson: these places loom largest in her work because they are the chief landscapes of her youth, the places that first captured and held her imagination. Furthermore, given certain parallels between the events portrayed in *The Optimist's Daughter* and the actual events of Welty's life, *The Optimist's Daughter* can be read as an argument both in defense of place and in defense of Welty's own decision to

remain a lifelong part of the community into which she was born. *The Optimist's Daughter* is, then, an apology for staying put.

As noted by Paul Binding, "most of [Welty's] fiction is set in the South, indeed in Mississippi, and it is Southern scenes she describes with the greatest intensity" (Binding 115). "Sometimes a specific place suggested a specific story ... But more often than not it is the particular but *non*unique – a house, a village, a café ... – that appeals to her" (116). It has also been noted that it is "by her use of the familiar local Mississippi settings" that Welty achieves the greatest believability in her stories and characters (Vande Kieft 52). Taken together, Binding and Vande Kieft's observations lead to a single conclusion: that Welty's best writing takes the ordinary, down home and commonplace as its setting. Notably, such settings stand in opposition to the grander, more pretentious locales adopted by Bowen. Whereas Welty sets *The Optimist's Daughter* primarily in the commonplace locations of hospital, hotel and home, Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* occurs in such urbane locations as Windsor Terrace in Regent's Park, Waikiki at Seale-on-Sea and Miss Paullie's school for girls. Before we endeavor to explore Bowen's upper class settings, let us lay a foundation by examining Welty's expert use of places recognizable and familiar to the common man.

The Familiar, the Particular and the Non-Unique

The protagonist of *The Optimist's Daughter*, Laurel McKelva Hand, occupies a world of places well known to Welty. Book One of the novel is set in New Orleans, Louisiana, a uniquely Southern location but also one that provides

an obvious contrast to Mount Salus, Mississippi, the setting of Books Two, Three and Four of the novel. While in New Orleans, Laurel primarily divides her time between two locations: the non-unique hospital where Judge McKelva, Laurel's father, is being treated, and the specific Hibiscus Hotel, a run-down mansion where Laurel and her stepmother, Fay, stay for the duration of the judge's medical confinement. Books Two, Three and Four are set in the small, Southern town of Mount Salus, Mississippi, and take place almost exclusively in and around the McKelva family home, a very particular and well-described location.

Binding describes the locations Welty chose to include in *The Optimist's Daughter* as "conventionally situated" (123) and, having noted similar settings in other works by Welty, was reminded that "in its original form the folktale, such as the Brothers Grimm collected, made use of features profoundly familiar to its audience," features that "were part of the daily landscape of life" (119). Thus, in Binding's view, when embracing the everydayness of places, Welty captured ordinary life, drew inspiration from traditional oral storytelling and created an environment accessible to her audience. By setting *The Optimist's Daughter* in a series of non-unique, or conventionally situated, locations like hospital, hotel and home, Welty gave support to her notion, expressed elsewhere, that, "the novel from the start has been bound up in the local, the 'real,' the present, the ordinary day-to-day of human experience" (*The Eye of the Story* 117). For Welty, the novel is and should be bound up in the ordinary experiences of life because such experiences are the very stuff of good storytelling.

Welty's hallmark use of commonplace locations instead of fantastic foreign locales flows naturally from her experiences growing up in the South. Welty has said that in the South, children learn to act as narrators at an early age because they live in a place "where storytelling is a way of life" (as quoted in Prenshaw *Conversations* 158). Children listen to and absorb the stories of day-to-day life told by the adults around them and, consequently, adopt both their stories and their methods of telling them (158). Like the Southern children to which she refers, the stories of ordinary human experience that Welty grew up with were incorporated into her life and became a part of her writing. In particular, Welty has conceded that *The Optimist's Daughter* contains autobiographical elements drawn directly from the stories she heard as a child: "in the case of *The Optimist's Daughter*, I did draw on some of the childhood and early marital experiences of my own mother" (128). In so doing, Welty was able to expand the setting of her novel from locales she was intimately familiar with, such as Mississippi and Louisiana, into West Virginia, which was admittedly her mother's terrain.

The importance of establishing a convincing, and oftentimes particular, sense of place has been discussed by Welty who understood that, "[b]esides furnishing a plausible abode for the novel's world of feeling, place has a good deal to do with making the characters real, that is, themselves, and keeping them so" (Prenshaw *Conversations* 121). For a writer to make both her setting and characters believable, Welty felt that, "One can only say: writers must always write best of what they know, and sometimes they do it by staying where they

know it" (130). For Welty, writing what she knew best meant not only writing about characters from the South who inhabit distinctly Southern places but also remaining in the South herself and living the same sort of life that she imagined for her characters. Thus, if it seems that Mount Salus and its inhabitants are particularly well known to Welty, it is not without good reason: Mount Salus is the original name of Clinton, Mississippi, which is located only a few miles west of Welty's Jackson home. What place could Welty possibly know better? What more plausible abode could she seek to construct? The very reason the settings and characters of *The Optimist's Daughter* are so real is because Welty is writing of what she knows best while staying right where she knows it.

In Book One of *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty describes New Orleans's Hibiscus Hotel in very specific terms. The Hibiscus is not a homogenous roadside motor lodge such as might be found on the outskirts of any town or city in America, but "a decayed mansion on a changing street; what had been built as its twin next door was a lesson to it now: it was far along in the course of being demolished" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 26). Given this description, it is clear that Welty wants to depict the Hibiscus as a place in ruins. Whether it is merely flawed but still in possession of an endearing character is a fact that remains to be seen. What is immediately clear is that the property is decaying, its street is changing and any potential for uniqueness is called into question by reference to its "twin next door" (26). Moreover, the fact that the adjacent property is "far along in the course of being demolished" does not bode well for the hotel's future (26). New times are coming and, as will be discussed in more detail later in this

thesis, old places like the Hibiscus had best stand guard lest they be sacrificed during the transformation.

New Orleans and the Hibiscus Hotel

Welty has written that, "One place comprehended can make us understand other places better" (*The Eye of the Story* 128). In her initial description of the Hibiscus Hotel, we learn that it has a bankrupt exterior, but the negative sense of place Welty is seeking to portray does not end with street-side observations. About the interior of the Hibiscus, she writes, "there was no intimacy" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 27), "the front door was never locked" (26), "the bathroom was always busy" (26), and there was only a thin, "landlord's strip of wallboard" to separate the rooms occupied by Laurel and Fay (27). Rather than a charming sense of neglect and a touch of off-color personality, Laurel observes only "cracked-open floral tiles" (27), "narrow rooms" and "hard chairs" (37). Instead of an approximation of home, the Hibiscus is its very antithesis. It is that place which, when comprehended, makes us understand the later locale of the novel better. It is by first experiencing the Hibiscus in Book One that the reader can truly appreciate the McKelva family home in Books Two, Three and Four.

Like a Russian nesting doll that, when opened, reveals a series of progressively smaller likenesses of itself, the ruined rooms of the Hibiscus give way to the changing street outside its door which, in turn, reveals the "strange city" of New Orleans in which the entire cosmos of Book One is contained (*The Optimist's Daughter* 2). In his article, "New Orleans, Mardi Gras, and Eudora

Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*," Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. argues: "Despite her distance from the life of New Orleans, Laurel nonetheless feels its threat," she finds the disorder of Mardi Gras to be oppressive, mocking and threatening (435). There is nothing good in New Orleans; nothing of substance Laurel can embrace; nowhere she can find comfort. There is only the sound of "crowds running wild in the streets" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 2). As the weight of the city bears down on Laurel, the foreboding that accompanies it foreshadows the coming death of her father.

By strictly dividing her time between hospital and hotel, Laurel manages to keep New Orleans at a distance (Brinkmeyer "New Orleans" 435), but her feelings about the city are really no better at close range. Take for example the passage in which Laurel leaves the Hibiscus to visit her father for what will prove to be the last time. Welty writes that Laurel stepped into a "warm, uneasy night," hailed a cab that "reeked of bourbon" and "strained forward" as the driver took "back streets, squeezing around at every corner" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 41-42). Laurel's ride back to the Hibiscus with Dr. Courtland's driver is no better: "It was slow going through the streets. There were many waits. Now and then the driver had to shout from the wheel before they could proceed" (54). Certainly, if Welty were so inclined, she could allow Laurel to abandon her grief for a moment and lose her thoughts in the madcap floats and colorful regalia of the Carnival parades. Yet, she does not. Instead, Laurel is only allowed to see them in the negative, as examples of difficulty and delay.

Practically lost in the New Orleans passages of *The Optimist's Daughter* is a sense of appreciation for the beauty and history of the city. Instead of wonder and admiration, the reader is compelled to feel discomfort and disapproval. By allowing the city to be viewed in this one-dimensional way, Welty is urging alignment with Laurel as opposed to Fay, for whom New Orleans is a wonder and delight. Instead of feeling inconvenienced or annoyed, Fay is energized by the commotion and activity of the Carnival night, a dichotomy that brings to mind Welty's observation that, "There must surely be as many ways of seeing a place as there are pairs of eyes to see it" (*The Eye of the Story* 130). Here, Welty has given us two pairs of eyes with which to view New Orleans: the "new," rosy eyes belonging to Fay who is seeing it for the first time and the "old," jaded eyes belonging to Laurel for whom the chaos of Mardi Gras is discomforting but of no great surprise. Ultimately, despite an apparent choice of viewpoints, a reader of *The Optimist's Daughter* is really left with only one acceptable way of seeing New Orleans: as a city filled with "the unmistakable sound of hundreds, of thousands, of people *blundering*" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 55). Even Fay, when she sees a man "vomiting right in public" has to ask: "Why did I have to be shown that" (55). Why indeed, if not to urge the reader toward a more negative view of New Orleans and to highlight Laurel's good judgment of the place as compared to the poor judgment exhibited in Fay?

Suzanne Marrs, in her article "Place and the Displaced in Eudora Welty's 'The Bride of the Innisfallen'," lends further support to the argument that Welty takes a generally hard view of New Orleans. Marrs, when discussing Welty's

story "No Place for You, My Love," draws attention to a particularly desolate description of New Orleans:

> Driving out of the primitive landscape, the woman from Toledo and the man from Syracuse return to the confines of New Orleans, a city where people shelter themselves from light and heat, where they keep the roofs up on their convertible cars, sit in restaurants under fans, and go home to sleep in "flaked-off colored houses" that are "spotted like the hides of beasts." (Marrs "Place and the Displaced" 662)

The descriptions of New Orleans and its houses in "No Place for You, My Love," like those in *The Optimist's Daughter*, are ruinous, threatening and far removed from the small Mississippi town and family home Laurel associates with her life in the South. Arguably, then, Welty is setting New Orleans and the Hibiscus in opposition to Mount Salus and the McKelva family home. Whereas New Orleans is full of "blundering" people, its houses are beastly and flaking, it seems that the residents of Mount Salus are all "old family friends" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 64) and that the McKelva home is surrounded by a perpetual garden where all manner of climbing roses grow (135) and where daffodils bloom in long streamers of hundreds of small white trumpets that reach down the yard (63-64).

By describing New Orleans in the midst of Mardi Gras as a place of chaos and disorder and the Hibiscus as a decaying ruin on a changing street, the beauty of Laurel's hometown and family home are made more apparent. In describing the McKelva home in terms that bring to mind an Eden-like garden,

Welty adopts "the image of the house as a stay against the deterioration of place and civilization" (Lutwack 204). The world around the home may fall into ruin, but the untouched perfection of the garden will persist. There are places within the home, such as Judge McKelva's library, which clearly elicit private themes. However, with both Becky and Judge McKelva gone, the home has become more of a public than a private place. When, following the death of her father, Laurel first arrives at the house "half a dozen — a dozen – old family friends" are already waiting there to meet her (*The Optimist's Daughter* 64). The house has been opened, there is "streaming light from every window, upstairs and down" (63) and Miss Tennyson Bullock is waiting for her on the front steps (64). Thus, at this point in its life, the McKelva "house represents family, class, and society more than nature and the individual" (Lutwack 204).

Mount Salus and the McKelva Family Home

Within the first few pages of *The Optimist's Daughter*, we learn that Judge McKelva's home for nearly fifty years has been Mount Salus, Mississippi and that he has traveled nearly 200 miles to an unnamed hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana to see Dr. Courtland, a "well-known eye specialist" and close personal friend (*The Optimist's Daughter* 10). His daughter, Laurel, grew up in Mount Salus and her deep and abiding connection to that locale and her family home plays a prominent role in Books Two, Three and Four of the novel. An intimate and personal connection to Mount Salus is equally important for Judge McKelva. After Dr. Courtland proposes a risky eye surgery, Judge McKelva tries to comfort his recently wed second wife, Fay, who is approximately the same age as Laurel.

"I'm in good hands, Fay," he says. "I know his whole family" (18). "My family's known his family for such a long time," Dr. Courtland also advises Fay (15). With these lines, Welty reveals the sense of shared community, familiarity and respect that come from knowing someone, and their family, for a very long time.

In *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty expounds on the notions of shared community, familiarity and respect first touched upon in *The Optimist's Daughter*. Of Miss Duling, whom Welty recalled from her grammar school days at Davis School, she writes: she "came of well-off people, well-educated, in Kentucky ... down to Jackson to its new grammar school that was begging for a principal" (*One Writer's Beginnings* 22). In the years that followed her arrival in Jackson, Miss Duling "came into touch, as teacher or principal, with three generations of Jacksonians. ... She'd taught most of our leaders somewhere along the line" (23). As a result of the connections she made with influential Jacksonians,

> When she wanted something done – some civic oversight corrected, some injustice made right overnight, or even a tree spared that the fool telephone people were about to cut down -- she telephoned the mayor, or the chief of police, or the president of the power company, or the head doctor at the hospital, or the judge in charge of a case, or whoever, and calling them by their first names, *told* them. It is impossible to imagine her meeting with anything less than compliance. The ringing of her brass bell from their days at Davis School would still be in their ears. (23)

By becoming fully a part of the place where she had chosen to live, Miss Duling obtained a degree of power and respect in the community that was uncharacteristic of her social position. Thus, Miss Duling is an example of the place a person is *from* being less important than the place they *become*.

The importance of becoming part of a place is also exemplified in Miss Pohl, a gym teacher at the Mississippi State College for Women, about whom Welty has written, "we had heard and believed, [that Miss Pohl was] Russian by birth, [and had] been crossed, long years ago, in love. She may have indeed been crossed in love, but she was a Mississippian, just like us" (*One Writer's Beginnings* 78). If Miss Duling could come down from Kentucky and earn the respect of the most powerful Mississippians and a star-crossed Russian gym teacher could become "a Mississippian, just like us," then place for Welty may be as much about where you put down roots, as it is where you first begin. Even Welty's own parents were not native Mississippians. Her father had "come not very long before from an Ohio farm" (18) and her mother from atop a mountain in West Virginia (4). Welty writes that, when her parents married, her mother left her home and family in West Virginia "and set off for a new life and a new part of the world for both of them, in Jackson, Mississippi" (52). Despite far away places of beginning, Welty's parents grew to distinction in their adopted home and formed lasting, near-familial relationships with those around them. Her father became a prominent insurance man and even oversaw the construction of Jackson's first skyscraper, the Lamar Life Building, a thirteen-story structure in the gothic mode of which he was very proud (Prenshaw *Conversations* 225).

In *The Optimist's Daughter,* Welty uses the relationship between Judge McKelva and Dr. Courtland to reveal the near-familial bond that can form between different families who settle in a common place. Dr. Courtland grew up in Mount Salus, and because of his connection to that place, and, therefore, to the McKelva family, he is the only eye doctor the judge will trust. Although a personal relationship certainly exists, Welty makes clear that Judge McKelva's belief in Dr. Courtland is also based on a shared commonality of place: "Both men smiled. They were of two generations but of the same place" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 11). The shared sense of place between Dr. Courtland and Judge McKelva is so strong that, even though Dr. Courtland was unable to save the judge's wife, Becky, when a fatal tumor formed behind one of her eyes, and even though he advises the judge that his own teacher, Dr. Kunomoto, would be willing to perform the operation, the judge's trust is unassailable: "Nate, I hied myself away from home and comfort and tracked down here and put myself in your hands for one simple reason: I've got confidence in you. Now show me I'm still not too old to exercise good judgment" (17). Thus, the confidence Judge McKelva places in Dr. Courtland reflects his confidence in the place they are from, it is an old confidence born from a lifetime of shared experience.

It has been written that, "Assaults on the certainties of place are reflected in literature by frequent expressions of loss and regret over the passing of old places and bitter disaffection with new places" (Lutwack 184). As fiction writers have responded to the loss and devaluation of traditional places, the topic has become "one of the principal motifs of literature over the last one hundred years"

(184). In fact, "from one point of view modern literature [can be seen as] a dialogue of opposed positions regarding the individual's relation to the emerging new world as a place" (184). Thus, despair over loss of place is frequently "countered with the hope of restoring attachments to remnant places, expatriation alternates with return to the impaired homeland, disaffection is answered with accommodation to the new places of our time" (184). Regret over the loss of old places and disaffection with new places is found numerous times in *The Optimist's Daughter*. When Laurel returns to Mount Salus, her home is impaired by the presence of Fay. Laurel hopes to restore her attachment to the home by cleaning, gardening, hosting her father's mourners and other acts of ownership but, ultimately, the home is lost and her despair must be met with an acceptance of her new place far away in Chicago. As a result, it appears Welty has squarely aligned herself with those modern writers who have chosen to engage in a dialogue of opposed positions whereby the supposed benefits of the new are weighed against the loss of custom, tradition and the sense of home that is embodied in the McKelva family house in Mount Salus.

The Opposition of Old and New

It has been noted that some writers become so obsessed with the opposition between certain places that those places take on a symbolic meaning in their writing (Lutwack 116). In Hemingway, for example, the primary opposition is between good and bad: "the good place is where the hero experiences love and death, and the bad place is where the hero is wounded" (116). "High land and low land make another pair of opposed places in

Hemingway. In a world that left few desirable places for his restless characters, the low places were to be avoided ... and the high places were to be sought out (117). A career-long interest "in the opposition of high and low places" has been also noted in the writing of Norman Mailer (118). Thus, the presence of a strong opposition between good and bad, high and low, or in the case of Welty, old and new, can provide a glimpse into the psyche of the writer.

Early in *The Optimist's Daughter,* Welty explains that "Laurel had only just now got here from the airport; she had come on a night flight from Chicago. The meeting had been unexpected, arranged over long-distance yesterday evening. Her father, in the old home in Mount Salus," had telephoned her with an "admission of self-concern" about his health "and Laurel had come flying" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 13). Welty's decision to introduce the McKelva family home in Mount Salus as the "old home" is notable as it sets that place apart from Laurel's new home in Chicago. Likewise, the "new part" of the cemetery where Fay buries Judge McKelva is placed in opposition to the old part where Becky is buried (108). In both instances, despair over the loss of the old traditional place is weighed against the benefits of the new. In the case of the old and new homes, there is no clear winner. Laurel certainly loses a great deal when giving up her old home to Fay but the reader knows so little about Laurel's new home in Chicago that the exchange cannot be fairly judged. The same cannot be said for the old and new parts of the cemetery, where the beauty of the old place clearly triumphs over any arguable benefit of the new.

The funeral procession approaches the old part of the Mount Salus Cemetery where Becky has been laid to rest. Welty describes the scene:

> The top of the hill ahead was crowded with winged angels and life-sized effigies of bygone citizens in old fashioned dress, standing as if by count among the columns and shafts and conifers like a familiar set of passengers collected on deck of a ship, on which they all knew each other – bona-fide members of a small local excursion, embarked on a voyage that is always returning in dreams. (*The Optimist's Daughter* 108)

By contrast, Judge McKelva is buried on "the other side of the moon" at the end of a road "too rough, as Laurel saw now, for anything except a hearse" (109). In this part of the cemetery, "on the very shore of the new interstate highway" (110), "there were already a few dozen graves ... dotted uniformly with indestructible plastic Christmas poinsettias" (109). Whereas the old part of the cemetery sits atop a hill that is heavily populated by statues and mature trees, the new part is in a sparely populated corner of the cemetery along the edge of what will become a busy roadway. It is a short time after Mardi Gras, and Christmas was many months ago. The plastic poinsettias then, stand as a sign of the neglect and lack of attention shown to the new place. Although they are as indestructible as the statues populating the old part of the cemetery, their memorial pales in comparison to the timeless winged angles and life-sized effigies of bygone citizens that have been standing since the old fashioned dress was in vogue.

Welty goes on to place old in opposition to new numerous times in *The Optimist's Daughter*. Sometimes this opposition is in regard to one place against another, but not always. People and things are also judged according to whether they are old or new. For example, when addressing articles of clothing owned by Laurel's late mother, Becky, Welty sets up the opposition between old and new with the following two passages. The first passage concerns a gaudy dress from New Orleans:

> "I remember once – it must've been the Bar Association Meeting, or maybe when he was Mayor and they had to function at some to-do in Jackson – anyway, once Judge Mac himself bought Miss Becky a dress to wear, came home with it in a box and surprised her. Beaded crepe! Shot beads! Neck to hem, shot beads," said Tish. "Where could you have been, Laurel?"
>
> Gert said, "He'd picked it out in New Orleans. Some *clerk* sold it to him." (*The Optimist's Daughter* 149)

The second passage concerns a treasured blouse from her childhood home in West Virginia:

> "The most beautiful blouse I ever owned in my life – I made it. Cloth from Mother's own spinning, and dyed a deep, rich, American Beauty color with pokeberries," her mother had said with the gravity in which she spoke of "up home." "I'll never have anything to wear that to me is as satisfactory as that blouse." (162)

As these two passages clearly attest, the dress Judge McKelva purchased for Becky in New Orleans (its very name contains the word "new") is no substitute for the homespun beauty of the one from her childhood home in West Virginia. The differences are clear. The former was an unattractive, manufactured product sold to Judge McKelva by "some clerk." The latter was sewn by Becky from her mother's own cloth and dyed by hand. The new, store bought dress could never compare with the memory, quality and uniqueness of the hand made blouse from the old home place in West Virginia.

Just as there was no contest between Becky's two dresses, there is no contest between the virtues of the old wife, Becky, and the new wife, Fay. "Fay had once at least called Becky 'my rival.' Laurel thought: But the rivalry doesn't lie where Fay thinks. It's not between the living and the dead, between the old wife and the new; it's between too much love and too little" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 178). With this passage it becomes clear that it is not just "newness" as a rule that Welty argues against, it is that particular sort of newness that pales in comparison to what it seeks to replicate or replace. The plastic poinsettias that dot the new part of the cemetery present a cheap memorial when compared with the impressive statutes that populate the old part. The store bought dress appears tacky and worthless when set alongside the hand sewn one from home. It is the knock-off, then, the cheap imitation that Welty despises. It is the person, place or thing that has too little love in it when there is so much love still to be had in the old.

For Welty, the importance of new and old places lies, at least in part, in the distance that new places create between family members. Fay wants to distance Judge McKelva, even in death, from his first wife, Becky, so she has him buried in the new part of the cemetery. Likewise, as Laurel's bridesmaids marry and begin their own lives, they move away from their parents' homes into the new part of Mount Salus: "While the bridesmaids' parents still lived within a few blocks of the McKelva house, the bridesmaids and their husbands had mostly all built new houses in the 'new part' of Mount Salus" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 147). Although less explicit than her comparison of the old and new parts of the cemetery, Welty's decision to move the bridesmaids out of the old and into the new part of town suggests a diminishment in status. Judge McKelva was a "Mount Salus man" and a "public figure" (78) with a home "three and a half blocks off Main Street" (63). Thus, there is at least the implication that, the farther the bridesmaids move from the McKelva house and the more they embrace new over old, the less connected they will be to the heart and public mind of the community.

Similar to the distinction Welty makes between old and new, is the distinction between what is up and down. When describing West Virginia, the childhood home of Laurel's mother, Becky, Welty calls it the "up home" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 144). This establishes a clear opposition between Becky's old home "up" in West Virginia and her new home "down" south in Mississippi. Just as the old places of the novel trump the new, Becky's up home will always be superior to her new home down in Mississippi. When Becky was dying she

told Judge McKelva: "I'd like better than anything you can tell me to just see the mountain one more time" (175). The implication of this line is that, for Becky, the benefits of her new home down south never outweighed those of her old home up in West Virginia. As an example of the incomparable benefits of her old home, Becky tells Judge McKelva of the delicate white strawberries that grew there: "Nothing you ever ate in your life was anything like as delicate, as fragrant, as those wild white strawberries. You had to know enough to go where they are and stand and eat them on the spot, that's all" (175). Becky knew that her up home, like the wild white strawberries, could not be taken with her. Yet, even when she traded her mountain home for the new one down south, she remained a girl from West Virginia. Her up home would always be a part of her.

Place as a Means of Introduction

In *The Optimist's Daughter,* new characters are often introduced by reference to the place where they are from. The members of the Dalzell clan, the family of the man in the hospital bed next to Judge McKelva, are a ready example. "You from Mississippi?" Mrs. Dalzell asks Fay as soon as they first meet and, without waiting for an answer, adds: "We're from Mississippi. Most of us claims Fox Hill," to which Fay quickly cries out: "I'm not from Mississippi. I'm from Texas" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 48). Not to be dissuaded, the Dalzells ask all at once: "How you like Mississippi?" to which Fay responds: "I guess I'm used to Texas" (49). The Dazells introduction and questions suggest an attempt to determine whether a commonality of place exists. When they meet with resistance, Mrs. Dalzell's son announces: "Mississippi is the best state in the

Union" (49). Not wanting to remain an outsider forever, Fay responds: "I didn't say I didn't have kin here. I had a grandpa living close to Bigbee, Mississippi" (49). With this simple admission, a sense of extended community is established and the Dazell clan immediately warms up to Fay.

When Fay's family, the Chisoms, appear unexpectedly at Judge McKelva's visitation, the introductions follow a similar pattern to those that occurred in the hospital. "I'm Mrs. Chisom from Madrid, Texas. I'm Wanda Fay's mother" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 84) are the first lines spoken in greeting. This introduction is quickly followed by other, similar introductions. "And this is some of my other children – Sis, from Madrid, Texas, and Bubba from Madrid, Texas. We got a few others that rather not come in" (84). Even Mrs. Chisom, who entered the McKelva house proclaiming that she and her brood were from Madrid, Texas, eventually tries to find some sense of shared community with the residents of Mount Salus: "both of us come from good old Mississippi stock!" Mrs. Chisom says of her husband and herself (89). Later, Mrs. Chisom advises that, when Mr. Chisom died, he wasn't buried in Texas (94). Instead, "we buried him back in Mississippi, back in Bigbee" (94). Eventually, Mrs. Chisom even admits that she might, one day, take "a notion to move back to Mississippi" (117).

Like Mrs. Chisom who now claims Texas but still has roots in Mississippi, other characters in *The Optimist's Daughter* are forever linked to the places of their past, or their family's past. The McKelva family maid, who has lived in Mount Salus since she was a little girl, is still called "Missouri" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 73). Even Laurel herself is named for "the state flower of West

Virginia," ... "Where my mother came from" (37). There is great importance, then, in being from somewhere. Whether Mississippi, Missouri, Texas, West Virginia, New Orleans, Mount Salus, Bigbee, or Fox Hill, the place people come from matters. Welty sees sense of pride about home and place as natural and so, naturally, she instills this trait in her characters. As such, personal introductions announcing a connection to place serve as shortcuts to determining whether a shared community exists.

The Idea of Home as Place

Upon returning to Mount Salus, Laurel is met by all six of her bridesmaids: "We came to meet you," one tells her (*The Optimist's Daughter* 61). "And to take you home" (61). Laurel has not lived in Mount Salus for many years and has her "own good place in Chicago," (114) yet her bridesmaids still refer to the McKelva house as her "home." Dr. Courtland, too, continues to think of Mount Salus as Laurel's home and his own for that matter. Shortly after Judge McKelva died, Dr. Courtland told her: "Laurel there's nobody from *home* with you. Would you care to put up with us for the night? Betty would be so glad" (53). This sentiment, of people from home being the ones who can be counted on in times of trouble, is echoed later by Laurel who tells Fay that the people waiting for them in Mount Salus are her father's friends, "exactly the ones he'd have counted on to be here in the house to meet us ... And I count on them" (66).

The idea of home as a place that remains part of a person regardless of where they may chose to live grows out of Welty's own abiding affection for her family homes in Jackson (first the one on Congress Street and, later, the one on

Pinehurst Street where she lived the majority of her life). In *One Writer's Beginnings*, we learn that Welty loved the house on Congress Street, and every room in it, and equated her feelings for that place with her early love of reading, "I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to. My mother read to me ... in the big bedroom in the mornings ... in the diningroom on winter afternoons ... and at night when I'd got in my own bed" (*One Writer's Beginnings* 5). When Welty was away from home, she missed it, almost like an absent family member who had not been able to join the rest of them on their journey:

> Back on Congress Street, when my father unlocked the door to our closed-up, waiting house, I rushed ahead into the airless hall and stormed up the stairs, pounding the carpet of each step with both hands ahead of me, and putting my face right down into the cloud of the dear dust of our long absence. I was welcoming ourselves back. Doing likewise, more methodically, my father was going from room to room re-starting all the clocks. (68)

Home is such an important place for Welty's characters that when the undertaker asks: "Now what would you like done with your father? ... May we have him in our parlor? Or would you prefer him to repose at the residence?" (62), the decision for Laurel is immediately clear: "My father? Why – at his home" (62). The choice is apparent because home is the place where understanding exists, where things make sense, even when the rest of the world is lost in disorder and confusion. "Here at his own home, inside his own front door, there was nobody

who seemed to be taken by surprise at what happened to Judge McKelva" (64). Home, then, is the best of all final resting places.

Initially, Laurel used her marriage as a means of justifying her choice to leave Mississippi for Chicago. Marriage and the desire to start a family was, after all, the reason Welty's own parents left their family homes in Ohio and West Virginia for a new life in Jackson, Mississippi. Once Laurel's husband is killed, however, she has no reason for staying away except, as one of her father's friends coarsely puts it, to sit "up yonder in Chicago, drawing pictures" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 98). Yet, "Laurel, young and recently widowed," does not move back home even "during her mother's long trial in bed" (171). After Becky dies, Laurel's reasons for remaining in Chicago become even less clear except to say that she had "somehow turned for a while against her father" who had seemed "so particularly helpless to do anything for his wife" (171).

After Becky's death, Laurel's father is left alone in Mount Salus and, as Laurel learns too late, "Yes, daughters need to stay put, where they can keep a better eye on us old folks" (*The Optimist's Daughter* 76). Everything bad that has happened, Judge McKelva's marriage to Fay and his death in New Orleans, is tied to the absence of Laurel in the household. If only she would have stayed put, so much could have been avoided. She could have been the one who Judge McKelva doted on, instead of Fay that poor substitute for wife or daughter.

"When Laurel flew down from Chicago to be present at the ceremony, Fay's response to her kiss had been to say, 'It wasn't any use in you bothering to come so far.' She'd smiled as though she meant her scolding to flatter" (*The*

home place figures prominently in *The Death of the Heart*, its presence does not invoke the sense of a symbolic landscape in the way that other places do for Bowen. Hotels, in particular, have a special attraction for her (e.g., her first novel, published in 1927, was entitled *The Hotel*). A stronger attraction to hotels than homes seems a natural result of Bowen's partiality for motion over rootedness. Whereas the home is a permanent dwelling, the hotel is a transient place of rest.

Furnished Rooms, Hotel Rooms and Vacation Houses

When, in the third and final book of the novel, Portia leaves Anna and Thomas' house at Windsor Terrace, she goes to find her would-be lover, Eddie. "Alienated from a society she cannot understand, living as an exile in London as she had with her mother on the continent, Portia can only seek a desperate companionship with the victim of a similar alienation, Eddie" (Heath 88). "To Portia Eddie is an escape from the reality of her isolation among the Quaynes to an ideal romantic isolation of love, where sex, though present, is a harmless mystery" (88). Yet, when Portia arrives at Eddie's, "furnished room" "the rotting stems of flowers left over from the last time he entertained a woman" (Van Duyn 19-20) still linger in the stuffy air where they mingle with "the smell of carpet and ashes and dust and stagnant tea" (19). Portia is not received well by Eddie and soon discovers he has known all along that Anna has been reading her diary.

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CHAPTER III

THE DEATH OF THE HEART:

PERMANENCE IN AN EPHEMERAL WORLD

Elizabeth Bowen's unfinished autobiography, *Pictures and Conversations*, begins with the lines: "The day this book was begun I went for a walk. The part of Kent I am living in has wide views, though also mysterious interstices" (*Pictures and Conversations* 3). Although the reader may not immediately know it, with these few words Bowen has already summarized her philosophy on life: travel, explore, discover. Bowen wanted to never stop moving, to never stand still. The walk, the wide views, the mysterious interstices, these words are a summation of her life. Bowen was born in Ireland, moved to England as a young girl, traveled about with her mother for a time and spent the summers of her late youth at the ancient estate of her father's family, Bowen's Court, in County Cork, Ireland. This "lifelong itinerant existence" (Hoogland 5) created in Bowen a passion for movement, a passion that is made clear in her approach to the concept of place in fiction.

Throughout her life, Bowen loved to travel and spent every available opportunity soaking in the ample vistas of Ireland, England, Italy, France and America. These locales and the small, strange places she paused in along the way, where chance encounters brought unexpected experiences, became the inspirations for her fiction. She has written that there was a "cleft between my heredity and my environment -- the former remaining, in my case, the more powerful" (*Pictures and Conversations* 23). However, as at least one

commentator has noted, "While her Anglo-Irish heredity remained the 'more powerful,' it was the environment provided by the English landscape and social scenery that implanted in Bowen a sense of history that would become one of the hallmarks of her fiction" (Hoogland 6). Had Bowen, like Welty, planted her roots in one particular place, she would have never enjoyed all of the places and experiences that later proved so influential in her writing.

As was the case with *One Writer's Beginnings*, the opening lines of *Pictures and Conversations* speak directly to Cresswell's definition of "place." The locale is England, the location is Kent and the sense of place is one of being on the move. Although, at the time of her writing, Bowen is "living in" this "part of Kent," it is immediately clear that she is not identifying this place as her home or as a place where she is trying to make a home. While she walks, she appreciates the panoramic scenes but it is the little oddities of the place that most intrigue her. Bowen is here, in Kent, near the end of her life, as she writes her autobiography, because this is the place where she spent her happiest times with her mother. By this time, Bowen's Court has been sold and demolished and, having never truly gotten over the death of her mother ("One of the words at which her stammer consistently baulked was 'mother'" [Glendinning 32]), Bowen has returned to Kent to recapture her youthful memories of that place.

Like Welty, Bowen appreciates the importance of the concept of place but addresses it in her fiction in a fashion more in keeping with the itinerant way in which she was raised. For Welty "standing still, staying put, [and] putting down roots ... are the means to participate and to draw from the mystery of place"

(Brinkmeyer *Remapping* 14), but Bowen is in motion while exploring and discovering the "mysterious interstices" of Kent. The fundamental difference between Bowen and Welty's approaches to place – roots versus motion – can be seen clearly in their stories and characters, and particularly in *The Optimist's Daughter* and *The Death of the Heart*.

Sense of place is not established as quickly in *The Death of the Heart* as it is in *The Optimist's Daughter*, but the details and images Bowen uses to accomplish it make it worth the brief wait. The novel opens with swans swimming "in slow indignation" through "channels of dark water" cut in "that morning's ice" (*The Death of the Heart* 1). The view widens to reveal a wooded island. It is dusk at "the height of winter" and "the city outside the park" is in a fog (1). A man and a woman have paused to talk "on a footbridge between an island and the mainland" (1). They are too distant to be overheard at first but as the camera closes in, we hear the man say: "You were mad to ever touch the thing" (2). We don't yet know who he is, what he is referring to or why he is even in the story, but the when and where of the place are already firmly set.

In this opening passage, Bowen writes of place in the same style that will characterize her efforts throughout the novel. She layers the details as deep and wide as the water through which the swans swim and arranges the pieces of her narrative, from beginning to end, like those of an intricate puzzle. Bowen's narrative cracks at times like "that morning's ice" creating "floating segments" similar to the "mysterious interstices" of Kent but, even in these moments, there

is the sense that Bowen, like Kent, is simply waiting for the reader to explore a little further, delve a little deeper and examine the mystery a little more closely.

The way Bowen approaches place in *The Death of the Heart* illustrates the importance of movement in a temporary and fleeting world. Where Welty cautions against leaving one's home and community, Bowen is ready and willing to strike out on her own. In Bowen's writing, characters that are immovable and cling to the permanent places of the world become jaded, while those who go out and explore the world maintain their sense of wonder. While Welty's depiction of place sets up firm social rules to control movement, Bowen's portrayal abandons rules in favor of an ever-changing, ever-moving natural approach.

Bowen begins *The Death of the Heart* just as she did her autobiography, with movement. Everything in the opening scene is in motion – the swans are swimming, the ice is floating, the clay is breathing, even the trees are soaring "frigidly up" – except for the two characters on the bridge, Anna Quayne and her gossiping conspirator, St. Quentin (*The Death of the Heart* 1). By having the natural world move while these two remain still, Bowen draws an interesting juxtaposition between what may be perceived as quick and what is to be understood as dead, a theme that will remain important throughout the novel. As the reader shall see, Bowen equates the idea of a lively and "awake" spirit, such as is possessed by her protagonist Portia, with innocence, while she equates stillness and stagnation, such as may be associated with Anna and her husband, Thomas, with experience and "atrophy."

The Quick and the Dead

In an interview with Jocelyne Brooke broadcast by the BBC in 1950, Bowen offered the following thoughts on *The Death of the Heart*:

> I've heard it, for instance called a tragedy of adolescence. I never thought of it that way when I wrote it and I must say I still don't see it in that way now. The one adolescent character in it, the young girl Portia seems to me to be less tragic than the others. She, at least hasn't atrophied. The book is really a study, it might be presumptuous of me to call it a tragedy of atrophy, not of *death* so much as of death sleep. And the function of Portia in the story is to be the awake one, in a sense therefore she was a required character. She imparts meaning rather than carries meaning. (Hoogland 57)

Thus, in Bowen's opinion, *The Death of the Heart* is "not so much a tragedy of adolescence as a tragedy of *atrophy*. It is not, in fact, Portia's predicament, moving though this is, which makes the story so terrifying: it is, rather, the insensibility, the emotional atrophy of the grown-ups who surround her" (Brooke 22-23). By describing *The Death of the Heart* as a "tragedy of atrophy," Bowen reinforces the notion that travel inspires the imagination and stillness leads to creative stagnation. For Bowen, it is not Portia's loss of her parents that sets up the tragic aspect of the story, it is Portia's confinement by family, society, houses and schools that is truly disastrous.

By positioning Anna and St. Quentin on a footbridge, a place that exists to promote movement from one location to another, Bowen is signifying the importance of place and of its counterpart, movement. The scene around the footbridge is both moving and still, "Bronze cold of January bound the sky and the landscape; the sky was shut to the sun—but the swans, the rims of the ice, the pallid withdrawn regency terraces had an unnatural burnish, as if cold were light" (*The Death of the Heart* 3). Although the very earth and sky seem restricted by the harsh winter afternoon, the world does not come to a halt. The swans, the ice, even the elegant regency style architecture with its white stucco facades and wrought iron balconies continue to shine in the cold air.

Bowen's approach to place is caught up in the notion that it was only through continuous movement that she learned to appreciate absolute stillness (*Pictures and Conversations* 44), and that there was "an advantage in being born when [she] was," before "motor-cars and their offspring motor-bikes" (43). Bowen believed that, because she was born before "the age of speed" and was already "there while it came into being," she had a greater sense of appreciation for it (43). In other words, by having experienced a world deficient in mobility, Bowen believed that she was able to more fully appreciate the freedom of the fast new one coming to life around her.

The ability to move quickly from one place to another was, for Bowen, a tool to awaken the eyes and make the "vision retentive with regard to what only may have been seen for a split second," as from the window of a quickly moving car or train (*Pictures and Conversations* 44). It is speed that, when contrasted

with the slowness of the surrounding world, "accentuates the absoluteness of stillness. Permanence, where it occurs, and it does occur, stands out the more strongly in an otherwise ephemeral world. Permanence is an attribute of recalled places" (44). Thus, it is through experiences in a transient world that Bowen believes we can discover the beauty of lasting places and, moreover, it was through her collection of "recalled places" that Bowen found the landscapes of her fiction (for example, the Heccombs' home at Seale-on-Sea is much like any one of the villas along the coast of Kent where, in her youth, Bowen and her mother stayed [29]). Likewise, Thomas and Anna Quayne's home at Windsor Terrace is an almost exact rendering of the home Bowen shared with her husband, Alan Cameron, at 2 Clarence Terrace, Regent's Park (Halperin 101).

Windsor Terrace and the Ruined Home Place

As *The Death of the Heart* opens, Portia Quayne's mother has recently died. Some years before her death, Portia's father also passed away. Portia's life with her parents had been a transient one, moving from this hotel to that due to the shame of her conception (her father, an older man, was married to another woman whom he left to help raise Portia). It has now been discovered that her father's dying wish was for her to live for one year with her half-brother and his wife in their house at 2 Windsor Terrace so that she could finally experience life within a fixed home environment. This idea, unfortunately, is none too appealing for her siblings.

Rather than accepting Portia into their lives in honor or memory of Mr. Quayne, "The unwilling foster parents, Thomas and Anna Quayne, accept Portia

grudgingly as a legacy visited upon them because of the sins of Thomas's father" (Heath 84). Portia brings a diary of her ideas and observations with her to Thomas and Anna's house. Because she has never lived in a true home of her own, Portia relies on the diary to provide a home for her thoughts. Houses, objects and possessions have never dictated Portia's sense of home but, given the lack of permanent things in her life, the diary has become her one constant. The diary is practically a sacred text to sixteen-year-old Portia, yet once inside Windsor Terrace, she loses all privacy in it as Anna's prying eyes violate its pages. Worse still, Anna does not keep Portia's secrets to herself but shares them with her friend, St. Quentin, whom we first met on the footbridge in the opening scene of the novel.

It has been noted of Thomas and Anna's house that, "The novel opens in wintertime; the emotional coldness inside Windsor Terrace is matched by the weather outside" (Coles 111). Another commentator has written: "Windsor Terrace is a social world without opportunity for the expression of feeling" (Heath 85). Interestingly, neither of these comments mentions Thomas or Anna at all. Rather, they refer to the physical location of Windsor Terrace. Bowen has written about the place in such a way as to make it a character unto itself. It is not simply an address; it is another actor on the novel's stage. Of Windsor Terrace, Bowen writes: "In this airy vivacious house, all mirrors and polish, there was no place where shadows lodged, no point where feeling could thicken. The rooms were set for stranger's intimacy, or else for exhausted solitary retreat" (*The Death of the Heart* 50). Even Portia's own room within the house was no different.

Despite its contrived prettiness, it is no more comfortable for her than Laurel's room at the Hibiscus. Portia has been tossed, entirely unprepared, into Thomas and Anna's world of things that reflect "taste and status" rather than love and comfort (Heinemann 8).

Windsor Terrace, and especially Portia's room within it, fails to succeed as any sort of an approximation of home due in large part to Thomas and Anna's inability to have children (*The Death of the Heart* 46). This failing is made painfully apparent by Bowen's description of Portia's room as the one "that could have been the nursery" (47). Even Portia's only sentimental connection to her mother, a collection of small souvenir bears from Switzerland, is unwelcome in this ruinously cold and unfeeling place (27, 31). Windsor Terrace is not, however, a ruined home without reason or justification. The negative environment in which Thomas and Anna now live is a direct result of the ruinous home in which Thomas lived as child.

Thomas's childhood home was lost when his father, Mr. Quayne, entered into an adulterous relationship with Portia's mother, Irene. "Thomas's father lost his head completely. He didn't come back to Dorset for ten days, and by the end of that time – as it came out later – he and Irene had been very wicked" (*The Death of the Heart* 17). As a result of Mr. Quayne's misdeeds, Portia was conceived and Thomas's home was never again "what it was"(18). Due to his father's "grotesque" act of "adultery and subsequent remarriage" Thomas's home was broken (Lee 106). After that time, Thomas was miserable; tortured by the embarrassment and shame of his father's adulterous mistake: "The idea of the

baby embarrassed Thomas intensely on his father's behalf. Words still fail him for how discreditably ridiculous the whole thing appeared" (*The Death of the Heart* 20). It was not until both his mother and father died that Thomas's "obscure shame" was lifted" (46).

Bowen's portrayal of one ruined home leading to another may serve to explain her abandonment of traditional notions of place in favor of mobility. In the absence of movement, the imagination has no new themes to inspire it. Thus, where a negative place association exists, it can be prolonged for generations if there is no move or attempt to dispel it. In the case of Thomas, the broken home he endured as a child affected his ability to create an acceptable home for Anna and himself. Although not explicitly stated, the implication is that Thomas is simply in a rut. If he would only abandon his reliance on permanence and embrace mobility, he might overcome the tragedy of his youth. However, in the absence of such change he is destined to remain in an emotionally cold and unfeeling place that is painfully parallel to his childhood home.

It has been written that, "Certain kinds of places, drawn from personal experience or literary stories, may have a special attraction for some writers over their entire career" (Lutwack 116). Examples of this phenomenon include houses in the works of Jane Austen and Henry James, domes in Mary Shelley, the dell in E.M. Forster, islands in John Fowles, and bathrooms in J.D. Salinger (116). By virtue of the writer's particular attention to such places, a "symbolic landscape" may be inferred in which those places repeatedly stand "for general conditions in the life of an individual and in the history of mankind" (116). While the ruined

home place figures prominently in *The Death of the Heart*, its presence does not invoke the sense of a symbolic landscape in the way that other places do for Bowen. Hotels, in particular, have a special attraction for her (e.g., her first novel, published in 1927, was entitled *The Hotel*). A stronger attraction to hotels than homes seems a natural result of Bowen's partiality for motion over rootedness. Whereas the home is a permanent dwelling, the hotel is a transient place of rest.

Furnished Rooms, Hotel Rooms and Vacation Houses

When, in the third and final book of the novel, Portia leaves Anna and Thomas' house at Windsor Terrace, she goes to find her would-be lover, Eddie. "Alienated from a society she cannot understand, living as an exile in London as she had with her mother on the continent, Portia can only seek a desperate companionship with the victim of a similar alienation, Eddie" (Heath 88). "To Portia Eddie is an escape from the reality of her isolation among the Quaynes to an ideal romantic isolation of love, where sex, though present, is a harmless mystery" (88). Yet, when Portia arrives at Eddie's, "furnished room" "the rotting stems of flowers left over from the last time he entertained a woman" (Van Duyn 19-20) still linger in the stuffy air where they mingle with "the smell of carpet and ashes and dust and stagnant tea" (19). Portia is not received well by Eddie and soon discovers he has known all along that Anna has been reading her diary.

Failing to find any comfort in Eddie's furnished room, Portia turns to Major Brutt, the last person she believes may actually like her. Portia is initially drawn to Major Brutt's room at the Karachi Hotel out of the belief that she and Major

Brutt share a common understanding of the world but quickly finds that he "is no better equipped to receive her" than Thomas and Anna had been (20) and that his place offers no more space, comfort or privacy than the Hibiscus Hotel offers Laurel in *The Optimist's Daughter*.

> The Karachi is a down-at-the-heels "warren," filed with those who, like Major Brutt, are hanging onto the economic and emotional edge of life. Everything creaks. The unchosen closeness of human beings to each other makes "love or talk indiscreet." At the very top, in the attic where he lives at a cut price, there is more privacy because the rooms are too small to be further divided up. Portia's physical presence jams the room. There is nowhere for her to sit up. (20)

As in the room at the Karachi, Bowen has left nowhere within the confines of the novel for Portia to comfortably rest. Her initial occupancy of Windsor Terrace in the first book of the novel has been a failure and her attempts to find a new place for herself in the third book, with Eddie and then with Major Brutt, fail as well. Even her stay at the seaside beach resort in the second book of the novel is a disappointment.

Waikiki, the Heccombs' house at Seale-on-Sea, where they live "only part of the year" was not built "for the rearing of families but for the vacations of strangers" (20). "When Portia first catches sight of it, one window has blown open, a faded curtain is wildly blowing out and the bell is hanging out of its socket" (20). Once inside, Portia finds the interior sounds and smells of Waikiki

to be no better than its outward appearance. The "bath water runs out noisily, waste gurgles in the pipes," and the "damp sea air and the smell of brine" invade the interior of the place where even "Doris, the maid, smells" (20).

Although Bowen would agree that, "Travel is often the spur to composition, and even accidental visits to places may release creative energy" (Lutwack 119), Portia's visit to Waikiki is not such a trip. Instead of overwhelming inspiration, Waikiki provides only a new layer of disappointment to Portia. That said, even the dissatisfaction Portia feels with this place is better than what she would have endured had she remained at Windsor Terrace. For Bowen, it seems that travel, even when the destination disappointing, may provide some measure of inspiration. As with Graham Greene, whose trips into the dark heart of Africa "molded him into a writer," (120) Bowen leaves open the possibility that Portia will draw some intellectual nourishment from her journey to the seaside.

The Danger of Staying Still

The variety of permanent places Portia encounters in *The Death of the Heart* amount to one disappointment after the next. From Windsor Terrace to Waikiki to Miss Paullie's school for girls, none of the stationary places to which Portia is exposed compare with those she inhabited in her former life. As in Welty's work, newness takes on a negative cast, but not for the same reasons. Bowen is less concerned with the distancing of family members and the separation of individuals from their community and more focused on the effect of pausing in permanent places when life is better lived on the move.

As noted earlier in this paper, Bowen intended *The Death of the Heart* to be "not so much a tragedy of adolescence as a tragedy of *atrophy*" (Brooke 22-23). Portia, notably, is the one character Bowen believes "hasn't atrophied," she is the one character in the novel who is "awake" (Hoogland 57). What better way is there to prevent physical deterioration and maintain mental alertness than movement? What better way to exhibit the effect of atrophy than to take a character in motion and tie them to a desk and chair as Anna and Thomas do when they send Portia to Miss Paullie's school for girls?

"Portia dropped like a plant the moment she got" inside Miss Paullie's school for girls (*The Death of the Heart* 63), and with good reason. The students had to enter through "the basement like so many cats" only to wind through a "fibre-carpeted passage" and up a "crooked staircase" into a room that "had no windows" and only the poorest ventilation (63). Is it any wonder, with a description such as this, why Portia "was not a success here," why "she failed to concentrate, or even seem to concentrate like the other girls"? (63-64). Bowen does not describe the nature or degree of education Portia received while traveling about prior to the death of her parents, in fact, "we are nowhere told about Portia's childhood" at all (Coles 112). All we know is that "Portia was unused to learning, she had not learnt that one must learn: she seemed to have no place in which to house the most interesting fact" (*The Death of the Heart* 64).

Miss Paullie's school for girls, then, is a new place that is entirely unfamiliar to Portia who does not even seem to know the basic etiquette of the

place. When caught reading a private letter from Eddie, her would-be boyfriend, on her lap, Miss Paullie scolds her:

> Surely that is not a letter? This is not the place or the time to read your letters, is it? I think you must notice that the other girls don't do that. And, wherever one is, one never does read a letter under the table: have you never been told? What else is that you have on your knee? Your bag? Why did you not leave your bag in the cloakroom? Nobody will take it here, you know. Now, put your letter away in your bag again, and leave them both in the cloakroom. To carry your bag about with you indoors is a hotel habit, you know. (66-67)

According to one commentator, "Portia's innocence does not constitute wisdom or even goodness. All it means is inexperience: Portia does not know how to behave in a world where feeling is devalued" (Warren 140). Of course, Portia cannot be expected to understand the norms of this place when, in reality, hotel habits are all she has been taught. Furthermore, "she has been raised by a mother who always acted from the heart, 'knowing that nine out of ten things you do direct from the heart are the wrong thing, and that she was not capable of doing anything better'" (140). If Portia's innocence and inexperience, her inability to act properly in a cold and uncaring environment, serves any purpose in the novel it is to render her more sympathetic as a character since, unlike so many other characters encountered along the course of the story, she has "not yet lost faith, hope, and trust" (Seward 31).

At Miss Pauline's school, Portia, who has been raised on the move, is being asked to stop and sit quietly still in this rather terrible place where there is nothing to interest her apart from a poorly hidden letter from Eddie and "a big domed skylight" (*The Death of the Heart* 63) where her thoughts would occasionally "go soaring up" (64). Portia is, essentially, "supposed to be unlearning [the] mode of behavior" taught her by her mother (140). Miss Paullie's very purpose, then, is to separate Portia from the freedom of motion, to break her hotel habits and domesticate her as though she were a feral cat brought first into the basement and only later, if her behavior becomes acceptable, allowed into the proper rooms of the house:

> These silent sessions in Miss Paullie's presence were, in point of fact (and well most of them knew it) lessons in the department of staying still. ... A little raised in her gothic chair, like a bishop, Miss Paullie's own rigid stillness quelled every young body, its nervous itches, its cooped up pleasure in being in itself, its awareness of the young body next door. (67)

It is not a great leap to now imagine Portia as being a cat-like animal with "nervous itches" and a desire to bolt for the nearest door, given the earlier descriptions of her on offered by Thomas and Anna. Early in the novel, St. Quentin asks: "You would call her a child?" (5). To which Anna replies: "In ways, she's more like an animal" (5), an animal that Anna, no doubt, has sent to Miss Paullie's to be trained into a lady. Though she likely does not know it, these words by Anna echo the way Thomas felt about Portia when, as a young child,

he would see her while visiting with his father: "Portia, with her suggestion – during those visits – of scared lurking, had started at him like a kitten that expects to be drowned" (47).

Portia does not fare well in the stifling environment of Miss Paullie's school and feels disappointment knowing that her mother, Irene, "would not have dared to cross the threshold of this room" where things were "fixed" and "safely belonged" (*The Death of the Heart* 68). If her mother were here she would have been "skidding about in an out-of-season nowhere of railway stations and rocks, filing off wet third-class decks of lake steamers, choking over the bones of *loups de mer*, giggling into eiderdowns that smelled of the person before-last" (68). If her mother were still here, both of them, "untaught," would have "walked arm-in-arm along city pavements, and at nights ... pulled their beds close together or slept in the same bed" (68). Such bohemian behavior would certainly not pass muster at Miss Paullie's school where little girls had to remain rigidly still and force any awareness of pleasure into a pen.

Miss Paullie's school for girls is certainly a place well known to Bowen who had attended "Downe House, the girl's boarding school near Orpington, in Kent" (Glendinning 38). Downe House was "a very powerful institution with a very powerful headmistress," Miss Willis, who told Bowen and the other girls on their first evening at the school "that it did not matter if they were happy, so long as they were good" (39). Unlike Portia, Bowen actually found quite a bit to like about Downe House and received a very good education there in both books and manners (40-41). Nevertheless, "she regretted in retrospect the loss of their

'sense of delinquency'," or at least regretted its compromise because "hers, in fact, was never really lost" (42). The notion that Bowen retained her sense of delinquency is best exemplified in her reputation for being sexually indiscriminate. As one commentator has noted, "limitations of space and confinement go hand in hand with sexual unfulfillment. Sexual relations with lovers and husbands diminish as space and movement become more confined" (Lutwack 113). Thus, it may have been Bowen's lifelong sexual delinquency, if it can be properly characterized in that way, which led to her abandonment of stasis in favor of mobility.

Unlike Laurel in Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*, Bowen's protagonist, Portia, never had a home or community to lose. She grew up as a bohemian and a wanderer and only now, late in her youth, is she thrust into a stale, stagnant, unmoving environment and told, in essence, this is normal. It has been written that "many of the stories of Bowen's heroines mirror her own. In a preface to her short stories, Bowen wrote: 'any fiction ... is bound to be transposed autobiography'" (Ingman 84). Here, the same certainly appears true. The parallels between Bowen's and Portia's experiences are every bit as striking as those between Welty and Laurel. In both cases, the writers have devised protagonists who represent them as nearly as possible while remaining within the confines of fiction.

"When she was seven, Bowen's father suffered a mental breakdown" after which time Bowen and her mother, Florence, not unlike Portia and Irene, "moved to England where, wandering around from villa to villa on the Kent coast, they

grew closer and more demonstrative" (Ingman 85). Moreover, exactly as was the case with Portia, Bowen's mother "was unable to help her daughter to negotiate her way into adult life for when Bowen was thirteen Florence died" (85). Finally, just as Portia was sent to live with Thomas and Anna, "Bowen was sent to live with her aunts, formidable women, very much at home with themselves and the world and very different from her dreamy, loving mother" (85).

In stark contrast to the closure Welty gives her readers at the end of *The Optimist's Daughter*, *The Death of the Heart* has an "ambiguous ending" which "teasingly frustrates the reader's expectations" (Kitagawa 495). The ending may imply "through open-endedness a future of compromise and delicate adjustment" or simply "a sense of possibilities" (495). In either case, the most important characteristic of the ending, in the context of the arguments made in this paper, is that of movement. At the close of the novel, Thomas and Anna's maid, Matchett, is on a journey to retrieve Portia and return her to Windsor Terrace. "It is repeatedly stressed that she travels uninformed of her destination, and the last paragraph presents her *about to* enter the hotel but still without knowing where it is. This unfinished movement seems to symbolize the novel's transient nature" (496) and, for that matter, the transient nature of life.

The novel, in fact, has come full circle. Portia began the novel as a wandering creature most at home in strange hotels, only to be forced into the role of a caged bird who was ordered to remain quiet and still in the seats of ruined places and failed approximations of home, then, near the end of the story, she emerges as a girl on the run. Having fled Windsor Terrace and been rejected by

Eddie, she invades Major Brutt's room at the Karachi Hotel in search of a kindred spirit but, sadly, finds only further betrayal as Major Brutt takes it upon himself to call Thomas and Anna with instructions on where to retrieve her. Will Portia be returned to Windsor Terrace where her mobility will be stifled yet again? Will she, like Bowen, look back one day on the loss of her "sense of delinquency" with regret or will she truly be like Bowen for whom the rebellious of youth was "in fact, was never really lost"? It may be that, sometimes, a bit of uncertainty is the best ending of all.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The Optimist's Daughter and *The Death of the* Heart reveal that, for Welty and Bowen, place is more than mere landscape. Place is both the scene upon which their novels unfold and the means by which they convey their abstract understandings of the world. Place provides the physical settings of the stories: New Orleans, the Hibiscus Hotel, Mount Salus, the McKelva family home, Windsor Terrace, Seale-on-Sea, and Miss Paullie's school for girls, among others, but it also reveals something about the psyche or symbolic language of Welty and Bowen.

Hospital, hotel, home, and graveyard, the principal settings in *The Optimist's Daughter*, are used by Welty to reinforce traditional notions of place in Southern life and society. As the center of family life, home is where the majority of the novel occurs, hospital and hotel provide a contrast to the familiarity of home and the graveyard sets up an interesting parallel. Like the homes of the living, the graves of the dead are divided into plots of greater and lesser real estate, some adorned with marble statutes, others with plastic poinsettias. Deep family roots are associated with both the home and the graveyard, while the hospital and hotel suggest only an impersonal sense of transience.

The apartments, furnished rooms, hotels and vacation houses inhabited by the characters that populate *The Death of the Heart* reflect Bowen's own partiality for places suggesting mobility as opposed to rootedness. Through her use of place, Bowen illustrates her belief that it is important to remain in motion

while living in an ephemeral world. To remain still is to become jaded; to explore is to live. Rather than embrace traditionally held places of importance, Bowen sets out to discover new vistas from which such places may be viewed and appreciated. It is not that Bowen wishes to be without a home, she simply refuses to accept its usual and customary form.

How any writer deals with the dwindling importance of place in modern life is an essential factor in understanding their work (Lutwack 213). Whether traditional notions of place are embraced or abandoned in favor of modern mobility is a necessary and relevant topic of study because this distinction "underlies a good deal of the thought of our time" (213). Having studied the role and function of place in *The Optimist's Daughter* and *The Death of the Heart*, we now know that Welty opted for the former path while Bowen chose the latter. Moreover, we know that the distinction between tradition and mobility is not entirely irreconcilable since, in the end, it is Welty's protagonist, Laurel, who leaves her family home behind and Bowen's protagonist, Portia, who is returned to Windsor Terrace. As readers, we cannot say whether Laurel will ever regret her decision to leave or whether Portia will ever come to appreciate her new situation because Welty and Bowen do not tell us. We can, however, conclude that it is possible for a traditionalist to leave home and a traveler to put down roots, given the proper circumstances and motivation. A new life may arise but, as Welty and Bowen have shown us, it will always be at the cost of the old.

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